

JTA, February 9, 2009

That's what they call each other in polite company.

UNRWA, the massive United Nations bureaucracy that administers assistance to the Palestinians, is locked in an unseemly epithet-laden battle here with some pro-Israel figures who say the relief agency should be shut down because it has been co-opted by radicals. They challenge not only the legitimacy of UNRWA but the refugee status of the 4.3 million Palestinians it is charged with serving, including 1.6 million in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

It's not a new fight, but its tone has become ferocious just when the new Obama administration is attempting to restore civility to a peace process bloodied by the conflict last month in the Gaza Strip. The fight comes as policymakers say the United Nations Relief and Works Agency is more critical than ever in getting desperately needed food and supplies to the Palestinians, and also when the agency is facing physical attacks from the Hamas-led regime in Gaza.

In the U.S. Congress, Reps. Steve Rothman (D-N.J.) and Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) are reviving their campaign to cut U.S. funds to UNRWA until it comes clean about what the lawmakers say are its irregularities and its coziness with terrorists. The United States provides between a fifth and a quarter of UNRWA's \$440 million to \$540 million annual budget. (The discrepancy in the 2008 figures arises from the gap between pledges from donor countries and actual projected payments.)

In recent days the lawmakers have been seeking Jewish support for a nonbinding resolution calling on UNRWA to tighten its employment policies against terrorist infiltration, and for a separate letter to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton asking for a cutoff in funding for UNRWA until a U.S. review of the agency is completed.

In a recent conference call organized by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Rothman said he needed Jewish communal help to overcome institutional resistance in Washington to cutting off funding for UNRWA, particularly among "the

U.S. Senate leadership who think that is an unfair and unreasonable burden on Palestinians."

Later, in an interview with JTA, Kirk bluntly likened the agency to his home state's scandal-plagued political machine.

"This reminds of Rod Blagojevich in its corruption," Kirk said, referring to the recent removal of the Illinois governor over pay-for-play allegations.

In their letter to Clinton, Kirk and Rothman suggest alternative "bilateral assistance mechanisms" to deliver aid.

The problem with this idea, some observers say, is that only a few such mechanisms exist on the ground, and they lack UNRWA's infrastructure. The respected American Near East Refugee Aid, for instance, has managed to distribute \$4 million in food and medical aid since the end of fighting -- a minor amount compared to the tens of millions UNRWA is expected to deliver.

In the past, Israel has said that despite its frequent disagreements with the agency, UNRWA is critical in getting relief to the Palestinians; Israel relies on the agency to keep Gaza from a total collapse.

Israeli officials would not comment for this article.

Israeli authorities watched nervously late last week after UNRWA temporarily shut down operations to protest raids by Hamas gunmen on its storehouses. The agency reportedly resumed operations Monday.

The Bush and Obama administrations also have seen UNRWA as critical. President Bush in December ordered most of the \$85 million in Palestinian relief funds to be funneled through the agency, and President Obama ordered that \$13 million of \$20 million in emergency postwar assistance be set aside for UNRWA.

Even as it is set to receive additional U.S. aid, the relief agency is facing a new wave of criticism -- this time from its former chief legal counsel, James Lindsay. In a recently released report written for a pro-Israel think tank, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Lindsay described UNRWA as highly politicized.

In the report, Lindsay refused to embrace the all-or-nothing approach favored by Kirk and Rothman and some Jewish groups, describing it as counterproductive. He insisted that UNRWA "is part of the solution," and has praised the role of its schools in creating the Palestinian intellectual class that now takes a leadership role in multiple disciplines throughout the Arab world.

Still, Lindsay asserted, UNRWA is also "part of the problem" because it allows itself to be politicized by the Palestinians.

Lindsay took part in a heated debate Feb. 3 at the Washington Institute's office with Andrew Whitley, the director of UNRWA's offices in New York. In a scathing reply, Whitley produced a tall pile of volumes of works on UNRWA to refute Lindsay's claim that his report was an unprecedented expose of an agency no one dared criticize.

Whitley then held up Lindsay's handsomely bound report and said it reminded him of a period he had lived in Paris. The report, he said, "reminds me of the ladies of Place Pigalle," the district famed for its transvestite prostitutes who promise one kind of adventure but deliver another.

If each side doth protest too much, it arises out of years of mutual frustration. UNRWA critics say it is stubbornly resistant to changes that would make it more accountable. The agency complains that the other side makes assessing whether it has reformed impossible by constantly shifting the goal posts.

In his report, Lindsay presented a litany of examples of UNRWA pronouncements that place the agency firmly on one side of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, beyond the considerations a relief group might have in protecting its charges. He noted instances in which UNRWA did not immediately condemn Hamas rocket fire into Israel.

Whitley, in his presentation at the Washington Institute, also could not resist such politicking. Responding to allegations that the agency does not properly vet its staff for terrorist affiliations, the UNRWA official delivered a "who is a terrorist" disquisition, noting that some of Israel's founders had been accused of terrorism. That elicited groans from the audience.

It was only afterward, during the question-and-answer session, that Whitley noted UNRWA's practice of periodically running staff names through Israel's intelligence services and summarily removing staffers with suspected terrorist ties. That answer might have put the matter to rest for a pro-Israel audience that instead was rankled by a history lesson on Israel's prestate militias delivered in Whitley's posh Oxbridge tones.

Lending credence to UNRWA's claim that its critics create movable targets is how the other side treats the staffing issue.

Kirk, Rothman and several Jewish groups accuse UNRWA of effectively hiring terrorists, citing anecdotal evidence but not substantive research. The critics never mention that UNRWA runs its staff names by Israel.

In his report which otherwise is tough on UNRWA, Lindsay dismissed the claims that the agency employs terrorists, noting that only a "few" of its 15,000 workers in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have "been convicted of terrorism-related charges." Besides," he added, "the relatively few examples of staff involvement in anti-Israeli violence that critics often cite are, for the most part, not clearly convincing."

But Lindsay criticized UNRWA for allowing staff to become members of banned political groups, including Hamas.

"The agency makes no effort to discourage supporters or members of Hamas (or any other terrorist group) from joining its staff," he writes.

UNRWA says it simply does not have the resources to track the extracurricular activities of all 29,000 staffers around the world. Doing so would effectively cripple the agency's operations in Gaza, where Hamas membership predominates and at times has been foisted upon residents.

Lindsay, Rothman and Kirk cite anti-Semitic and anti-Israel depictions in textbooks used in UNRWA schools. Whitley acknowledged the problem, saying it was especially aggravated among Palestinian refugees in Syria. But the UNRWA official said the agency is constricted by rules aimed at integrating Palestinians into surrounding societies.

In an interview with JTA, Rothman said UNRWA's prevailing consideration should be that any funding of Hamas, however indirect, violates the laws of its largest donor, the United States.

"It's against U.S. law to have U.S. taxpayer dollars flow to a terrorist organization," he said. "During the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, it is unacceptable that an organization receiving U.S. financial aid should not be required to be accountable for every dollar it receives."

The General Accounting Office, Congress' auditing body and a member of the U.N. Board of Auditors -- it did not participate in the most recent UNRWA audit -- is writing a report on UNRWA that should be ready by the spring.

Nothing has been released, but the sides already are exchanging barbs: UNRWA insiders say they are eager to see the report, believing it will vindicate the agency, while Kirk accuses UNRWA of not allowing GAO staff sufficient access for a thorough report.

"There are basic principles at stake here," Kirk said. "The spending of U.S. taxpayer funds should be transparent and accountable, and bad activities should have consequences."